

## **The Lincoln – Trumbull Connection**

Allison Weigel  
Belleville Township High School West, Bellville  
Teacher: Melissa Schmitt-Crafton

During his years in office, Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois influenced American politics with his steadfast beliefs and sharp logic. He was one of seven Senators to vote against convicting President Johnson of impeachment charges. Prior to that, he had introduced the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. However, his most influential act was unintentional. Lyman Trumbull was a major force that prompted Abraham Lincoln's rapid rise to political prominence and the Presidency.

In the years preceding the Civil War, the top political issue was the spread of slavery. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 established that all states or territories formed from the remainder of the Louisiana Territory north of the parallel 36 degrees 30 minutes would be free, and all south of that line would allow slavery. On January 4, 1854, Senator Stephen A. Douglas proposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would repeal the Missouri Compromise and leave the decision of slavery in this area to popular sovereignty. "The possibility of extension of slavery into the territories brought both Lyman Trumbull and Abraham Lincoln back into politics", claimed one historian.

In that year's Senate election, the main contenders for Illinois' seat were Trumbull, Lincoln and a Free-Soiler named Matteson. Both Trumbull, a Democrat, and Lincoln, a Whig, opposed Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska Act, and were hoping to counter-balance him in the Senate. In 1854 Senators were elected by state legislatures, and to win the election, a candidate needed a majority of three ballot rounds. The legislatures voted

several times before Lincoln realized he could not win. Instead of seeing Matteson, a pro-Nebraska Act man win, he transferred his Whig votes to Trumbull which enabled the latter to win the election.

As a Senator, Trumbull immediately entered the debate. In his first senatorial speech, he attacked Douglas' Kansas-Nebraska Act, saying Douglas' theory of popular sovereignty was a sham. He asked Congress to repeal the Act and restore the Missouri Compromise. Douglas came back with a furious speech, attacking Trumbull's personal character, but Trumbull ended with a stout rebuttal. "The Illinois constituents . . . had been waiting for a long time for some- one to give battle to the all-powerful 'Little Giant' [Douglas] and Trumbull was flooded with letters of congratulations and high praise for his performance in the debate." "The people of Illinois were convinced that Douglas now had in the Senate an opponent who was his equal in intellect and his superior in manners."

As these debates raged, Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats were beginning to form the Republican Party, which would untie them on the common ground against slavery. As the new, loosely organized party prepared to nominate its first national ticket, Trumbull, still a Democrat received a "friendly and frank" letter from Lincoln informing him that he belonged in the Republican Party. Lincoln told him his influence in the nomination would be greater than any other Illinoisan and he should attend the convention. Trumbull took Lincoln's advice, and joined the ranks of the Republican

Party in 1856. “If there ever had been any ill-feeling between Lincoln and Trumbull as a result of the 1854 election, it was not quickly replaced by a firm political alliance between the two men”, wrote historian Mark Krug.

In 1858, when Douglas stood for reelection, Trumbull was as widely known as Douglas was. Both carried high stature and prestige. Trumbull had made a reputation for himself as an unbeatable public speaker and debater, whose arguments were firmly grounded in logic and intellect. Lincoln, on the other hand, was respectable, but generally unknown.

When Lincoln was announced as the Republican Senate candidate in 1858, the Democrats quickly spotted Lincoln and Trumbull’s alliance. Fearing Douglas would have to battle both men, they tried to weaken their alliance and neutralize Trumbull’s role in the campaign by recasting the 1854 Senate election. They accused Trumbull of cheating Lincoln out of the seat, claiming that the two men had an agreement where Lincoln was promised the seat, but that Trumbull had broken the agreement. “Trumbull and his friends always indignantly denied this accusation, and Lincoln repeatedly exonerated Trumbull of any blame”, wrote Krug. Nonetheless, the accusation caused the Republican leaders to urge Trumbull to campaign for Lincoln. They also wanted to make use of Trumbull’s experience in debating Douglas, his talents as a speaker, and his appeal to southern Illinois voters. They thought that an ex-Democrat would be more effective in fighting a Democrat than an ex-Whig.

When Trumbull could no longer resist the pressure from his friends and the party, he reluctantly joined the campaign. Lincoln, himself, did not request Trumbull's help and was convinced that he could handle Douglas alone. During the campaign, Trumbull seemed to be more interested in defeating Douglas than electing Lincoln. Trumbull's attacks on Douglas infuriated the "Little Giant," who lost his usual composure and hurled personal insults at Trumbull. Douglas complained that he was being forced to take on two candidates instead of one.

This became a turning point in Lincoln's political career. Trumbull appeared to be fighting Lincoln's battle for him, and Lincoln was not willing to ride into office on Trumbull's coattails. He had to find a way to force Douglas to debate only the issues at hand and leave Trumbull out of the picture. He had to prove to the people of Illinois and the country that he was as good a match for Douglas as Trumbull was. Lincoln decided to challenge Douglas to the series of debates that would become a renowned part of American history. Although Lincoln lost the election, the debates helped him become a figure of national importance. The debates not only proved that Lincoln was as politically able as Trumbull, but that he had greater popular appeal. "He, unlike Trumbull, had the power to tire men's souls to moral indignation," again, according to Krug.

Because of his great popular appeal and his well-known name, the Republican Party nominated Lincoln for the presidency in 1860. Although Trumbull loyally

supported Illinois' endorsement of Lincoln for President, he had little enthusiasm for Lincoln's candidacy. Trumbull wrote to Lincoln and helped him campaign. Lincoln, of course, won the election and changed the country's history.

If Trumbull had not won the Senate seat in 1854, Lincoln might not have become the best choice for the presidential candidate in 1860. If Trumbull had not established himself as Douglas' adversary, he might have helped Lincoln's campaign in 1858. If Lincoln had not had to compete with Trumbull for the spotlight in 1858, he might not have challenged Douglas to the debates that made him so famous. Lyman Trumbull, although often overlooked, was the pivotal figure in Lincoln's career who caused him to rise to political power, allowing him to lead the nation in one of its most important eras and be remembered as one of America's greatest leaders. [From Paul Angle, *The Lincoln Reader*; Robert Howard, *A History of the Prairie State*; Mark Krug, "Lyman Trumbull and the real issues in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates", *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1964); Mark Krug, *Lyman Trumbull Conservative Radical*; Rose Mansfield, "Lyman Trumbull 'Father of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment'", *Journal of the St. Clair County Historical Society* (1977); Alvin Neblsick, *A History of Belleville*; Theodore Pease, *The Story of Illinois*; Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln The Prairie Years*; and Hoarce White, *The Life of Lyman Trumbull*. ]